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REPRESENTATIONS OF THE NATURAL WORLD IN OLD ENGLISH POETRY

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To my parents

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Abbreviations

AN&Q	*American Notes & Queries*
ASE	*Anglo-Saxon England*
ASPR	The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, 6 vols. (New York, 1931–42)
Bosworth–Toller	*An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, ed. J. Bosworth and T. N. Toller (Oxford, 1898)
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina (Turnhout)
CSASE	Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
De doctrina Christiana	*Sancti Aurelii Augustini de doctrina Christiana libri quattor*, ed. W. M. Green, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 80 (Vienna, 1963)
DOE	*The Dictionary of Old English*, ed. A. C. Amos *et al*. (Toronto, 1988–)
EETS os	Early English Text Society, original series
EETS ss	Early English Text Society, supplementary series
ELN	*English Language Notes*
ES	*English Studies*
Historia ecclesiastica	*Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, (Oxford, 1969)
JAF	*Journal of American Folklore*
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
JIES	*Journal of Indo-European Studies*
LSE	*Leeds Studies in English*
MÆ	*Medium Ævum*

MGH AA	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
MP	*Modern Philology*
MS	*Mediæval Studies*
Neophil	*Neophilologus*
NLH	*New Literary History*
NM	*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*
N&Q	*Notes & Queries*
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 2nd edn, 20 vols. (Oxford, 1989)
PL	Patrologia cursus completus, Series Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844–64)
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
PQ	*Philological Quarterly*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SM	*Studi medievali*
SMC	Studies in Medieval Culture
SN	*Studia Neophilologica*
SP	*Studies in Philology*
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*

1

Introduction: defining the natural world

> what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning.[1]

Monge sindon geond middangeard
unrimu cynn, þe we æþelu ne magon
ryhte areccan ne rim witan;
þæs wide sind geond world innan
fugla ond deora foldhrerendra
wornas widsceope, swa wæter bibugeð
þisne beorhtan bosm, brim grymetende,
sealtyþa geswing . . . (*The Panther* 1–8a)[2]

Representations of the natural world in Old English poetry, like the creatures described in *The Panther*, are difficult *ryhte areccan* 'to declare rightly', for their 'method of questioning' is foreign to modern minds. We can begin to appreciate the difference between our own conception of the natural world and that represented in Old English poetry by noting that the Anglo-Saxons did not have a word to indicate 'the natural world' in their native language. They did have words for 'nature' in the sense of 'essence' or 'character': *cynd* means 'native constitution, natural qualities,

[1] Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, p. 46.

[2] 'There are many, countless races through the earth; their nature we cannot rightly declare, nor know their number, because the multitudes of birds and land-treading beasts are widely distributed through the world, as [widely as] the water, the roaring sea, the surge of salt-waves, surrounds this bright womb.' Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in Old English are taken from ASPR, except for quotations from *Beowulf*, which are taken from *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Klaeber. Translations are my own.

race, social rank'[3]; *cynde* means 'natural, innate, inborn'[4]; *gecynd* means 'native constitution, innate disposition, established order of things, natural condition, manner, species, offspring, natural right'; *cyn* means 'race, class, species'; *æðelo* means 'nature' in addition to 'nobility, nobility of birth, birthright, noble race'.[5] The Anglo-Saxons also had words for the world as a whole: *sceaft* means 'creation, origin, what is created, a creature'; *gesceaft* means 'the creation, a created being or thing, creature, element'.[6]

We, too, might describe these concepts using the word 'nature' but not 'the natural world'. For those living in the twentieth century, the natural world includes animals, plants, the weather, bodies of water and landscape, not the abstract idea of innate characteristics or the religious idea of the world as a creation of God. For people today the natural world specifically excludes and is defined by the exclusion of: (1) supernatural elements, and (2) human elements. Old English writers, however, have left behind no word or phrase to describe what now appears to be a straightforward and basic entity.

This gap in the Old English vocabulary is not an accident caused by the loss of manuscripts. It reflects the absence of the concept itself. Of course, the Anglo-Saxons did depict, for example, birds and storms in their poetry. However, in these texts it is not possible to separate natural from supernatural phenomena: devilish sea-monsters (*niceras*), whales, wolves, demons (*þyrsas*), deer, blood-thirsty, man-shaped creatures (the Grendelkin), birds – all inhabit the same landscapes and interact with human beings in parallel ways.[7] As a result, on a basic level the Anglo-Saxons did not have a word or expression for the modern conception of the natural world because they did not conceive of an entity defined by

[3] See *DOE*, s.v. *cynd*.

[4] See Bosworth–Toller, s.v. *cynde*.

[5] See *DOE*, s.v. *gecynd*, *cyn* and *æðelo*. The focus on characteristic properties present from birth in these Old English words accurately translates the meaning of the Latin *natura* as explained by Isidore: 'Natura dicta ab eo quod nasci aliquid faciat. Gignendi enim et faciendi potens est' 'Nature is said to be that which causes something to be born. It is the power of giving birth and making' (*Etymologiae* XI.i.1, ed. Lindsay). For the meaning of 'nature' inherited from Aristotle (nature as a principle of movement and existence), see Weisheipl, *Nature and Motion*, pp. 5–7.

[6] See Bosworth–Toller, s.v. *gesceaft*. For further discussion of the words in this paragraph, cf. also *A Thesaurus of Old English*, ed. Roberts, Kay and Grundy.

[7] These creatures appear in *Beowulf*, *The Whale*, *Maxims II* and *Guthlac* and will be discussed further below.

the exclusion of the supernatural.[8] On the other hand, the modern definition of the natural world as all that is external to humanity can be applied to Old English poetry, for the Anglo-Saxons did represent many entities defined as strange, frightening and alien to humanity – things that modern critics would collectively call 'the Other'. One could collect these members of 'the Other' and be more than half correct if one wanted to label them 'the Anglo-Saxon natural world'.[9] The problem cannot be solved merely by seeking a different label or more inclusive definition for 'the natural world', however, for the Anglo-Saxons did not have a word to designate 'the Other', either. They did not conceive of this group of entities as a specific, identifiable whole, and their representation of them maintains many irreconcilable elements.[10] As a result, although the present investigation will refer to representations of 'the natural world', it will include entities which would no longer be considered compatible with natural phenomena, and it will not create a convenient, anachronistic category for them. Instead, it will group together representations that share basic similarities and analyse their functions in their respective texts.

ACTUAL PHYSICAL CONDITIONS

Before analysing the texts in which these representations take place, however, it may be useful to examine the physical conditions actually experienced by the Anglo-Saxons. England has a northern but temperate climate, with an average temperature of about 9°C.[11] Its heavy precipitation is legendary but not dangerous; such precipitation is, in fact, not exceptional in comparison with other European countries.[12] Although modern inhabitants of the island are unlikely to express pleasure with the

[8] Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, pp. 6, 9; K. L. Jolly, 'Father God and Mother Earth: Nature-Mysticism in the Anglo-Saxon World', in *The Medieval World of Nature: A Book of Essays*, ed. J. E. Salisbury (New York, 1993), pp. 221–52, at 224. Cf. also J. P. Tripp, Jr, *Literary Essays on Language and Meaning in the Poem Called Beowulf: Beowulfiana Literaria* (Lampeter, 1992), pp. 25–6.

[9] Chapters 2, 3 and 4 examine these types of representations of 'the natural world'.

[10] Chapters 5 and 6 examine representations which exemplify the contradictory and disunited character of 'the natural world'.

[11] Schuurmans and Flohn, 'Climate Variability', pp. 65–117, at 75.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

climate, neither are they likely to see themselves threatened by it. The Anglo-Saxons, however, were less proficient at fortifying themselves against weather conditions: although modern inhabitants consider cold and wetness unpleasantly inconvenient, the same conditions could justifiably, even inevitably, be considered pernicious if, instead of insulated walls, central heating and sealed doors and windows, there were only drafty, one-room dwellings heated by single fires for protection from the elements.[13] There is also some evidence that the weather endured by the Anglo-Saxons was more severe than that experienced now. While the rise of the Roman Empire was accompanied by an amelioration in climate, its fall coincided with a deterioration in climatic conditions. In the centuries following, the Anglo-Saxons lived through colder, stormier weather, rougher seas and more snow than that experienced previously, and worse weather than that experienced now.[14] The weather did not break until near the end of the Anglo-Saxon period – (the beginning of the 'Medieval Warm Epoch' (900–1400 AD).[15]

It is tempting to view the correspondences between cultural events and climatic change as more than coincidence, to say that clement weather facilitated the rise of the Roman Empire, inclement weather helped determine its fall, and continuing harsh conditions maintained the 'dark' character of the Dark Ages, but other factors must be considered. Otherwise, having attributed the stifling of the Anglo-Saxons to oppressive weather, one would be unable to explain why the later, harsher conditions of the 'Little Ice Age' (1400–1800 AD) did not stifle the Renaissance, Reformation and Romantic eras.[16] It is possible that climate

[13] Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, p. 5. For a summary of some of the archaeological evidence for living quarters, see R. Cramp, 'The Hall in *Beowulf* and in Archaeology', in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period*, ed. Damico and Leyerle, pp. 331–46.

[14] During this period winters are documented, often for the first time; there were record snowfalls and unprecedented ice on rivers, even on so southerly rivers as the Nile. See H. H. Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World* (London, 1982), p. 157.

[15] H. H. Lamb, 'Climate in the Last Thousand Years: Natural Climatic Fluctuations and Change', in *The Climate of Europe*, ed. Flohn and Fantechi, pp. 25–44, at 35–8.

[16] It has been argued that the climactic conditions during this period did, in fact, have 'severe economic and demographic impacts upon many societies in preindustrial Europe'. See C. Pfister, 'The Little Ice Age: Thermal Wetness Indices for Central Europe', in *Climate and History: Studies in Interdisciplinary History*, ed. R. I. Rotberg and T. K. Rabb (Princeton, NJ, 1981), p. 116.

is only historically significant in frontier areas and that its effects are marginal when discussing change in history.[17]

However significant the climate was in political terms, the challenge posed by the weather had far-reaching consequences for most individuals. Exposure to cold and damp made the Anglo-Saxons prone to diseases of the joints and intensified the virulence of the infectious diseases that plagued them.[18] Unprotected by modern medical treatments like antibiotics, the Anglo-Saxons had every reason to fear a world that attacked them daily with mysterious weapons, leaving them crippled or dead.[19] Now we know that, although their diet was adequate to ward off starvation, many Anglo-Saxons suffered from vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and their resistance to disease was consequently low.[20] We also know that diseases are spread by mosquitoes,[21] that water bears harmful parasites (liver flukes, for example)[22] and that a lack of hygiene is dangerous. Although the Anglo-Saxons assumed correctly that some of their ailments travelled invisibly through the air,[23] for the most part they did not understand the sources of illness and consequently could do little to defend themselves from it.[24] The medical texts that remain from this period testify that the Anglo-Saxons fought back against the threats from this invisible component of

[17] J. L. Anderson, 'History and Climate: Some Economic Models', in *Climate and History: Studies in Past Climates and their Impact on Man*, ed. T. M. L. Wigley, M. J. Ingram and G. Farmer (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 337–55, at 351.

[18] Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, p. 5.

[19] '[Barbarian man's] views of the nature of disease remain disjointed but, since he knows well that he can sustain injury at his own hands or those of others, he commonly conceives that his symptoms are due to injuries inflicted by beings like himself, and that his sufferings are produced by weapons or agents comparable to those that he himself employs.' Grattan and Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine*, p. 3.

[20] Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, pp. 6–9.

[21] Malaria was probably endemic in Anglo-Saxon England; this, coupled with dietary iron deficiencies, struck the female population especially hard (*ibid.*, pp. 10 and 17–18).

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[23] See, for example, the charm, *For a Sudden Stitch*. For discussion of this charm, see below, pp. 120–1.

[24] The Anglo-Saxon doctor or leech has been described as being 'concerned only with the day-to-day treatment of symptoms and hardly ever with principles drawn from the simplest theory. It would indeed be too much to say that the leech was interested in "disease", because that is an abstraction which he had not reached' (Grattan and Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine*, p. 92).

their environment with a wide variety of strategies, both rational and mystical,[25] but gravesites indicate that it was a losing battle: Anglo-Saxon life expectancy was short.[26]

In contrast, the visible agents of the natural world – animals – posed less of a threat; Britain does not support many dangerous animals.[27] Although scorpions do exist in Britain, along with many species of wasps and bees, there are no native invertebrates that could cause the Anglo-Saxons to fear for their lives, as, for example, the North American black widow spider might. Reptiles are not especially prevalent in Europe and even less so in Britain; snakes, generally the most feared of reptiles, exist in only three species, of which none is over two metres in length and only one, the adder, is poisonous (its bite, moreover, is not lethal).[28] Birds are, as in most places, innocuous. Most mammals, too, are harmless, the majority being small rodents. At present the largest carnivores are foxes, but the Anglo-Saxons also shared their environment with the more formidable bear and wolf.[29] Both of these deserve healthy, health-preserving respect, but are unlikely to have been responsible for large numbers of deaths. Along with the wild boar, which was still common[30] and perhaps more dangerous because of its aggressiveness, they were the only animals likely to make the Anglo-Saxons feel threatened.

Like the weather, however, animals could attack indirectly; otherwise harmless shrews, mice, rats, hares and moles devoured the crops that formed the staples of the human diet, small predators like foxes harassed poultry, and wolves took their toll on sheep. Even the vegetable world contributed its share of resistance, not only through plants that armed themselves, like thistles and nettles,[31] but also in the form of crop-

[25] Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, chapters 12 and 13, pp. 117–58.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[27] See *Kingfisher Natural History*, ed. Chinery.

[28] *Ibid.*, pp. 272–4.

[29] And also presumably the wild cat. Domestic cats are present in Anglo-Saxon England from the eighth century, but there are no certain descriptions of wild cats in Old English, although there are references to their lairs in place names. See Jordan, *Die altenglischen Säugertiernamen*, pp. 34–5. Jordan also argues that lynx must have been present as well (*ibid.*, p. 37). For discussion of the demise of wild cats and other, now extinct predators, see A. Dent, *Lost Beasts of Britain* (London, 1974) and Freethy, *Man and Beast*, pp. 243–5 and 252–3.

[30] Freethy, *Man and Beast*, pp. 250–2.

[31] See Aldhelm's *Enigma XLVI: Urtica* (Nettle).

choking weeds. The task of cultivation in itself was a battle[32] in which the Anglo-Saxons struggled to extract what they needed from the land, without the bulwarks provided by later advances in knowledge and technology:

> The most advanced systems of crop-rotation known to the age required that every year half or a third of the cultivated soil should lie fallow. Often indeed, fallow and crops followed each other in irregular alternation, which allowed more time for the growth of weeds than for that of the cultivated produce; the fields, in such cases, represented hardly more than a provisional and short-lived conquest of the waste land, and even in the heart of the agricultural regions nature tended constantly to regain the upper hand. Beyond them, enveloping them, thrusting into them, spread forests, scrub and dunes.[33]

Under such circumstances, a fearful defensiveness with respect to natural phenomena may appear inevitable: wind and precipitation battered against flimsy structures erected as defence, disease struck with its invisible weapons, the vegetable world opposed human beings in their need to eat, small animals leached away that which was wrestled from the land and wolves haunted the wilderness.

SELECTIVITY

This apparently inevitable fearfulness before the power of the natural world should not be accepted unquestioned. However much damage shrews, mice, rats, moles, hares and foxes did, they have no place in Old English poetry.[34]

[32] Exeter Book *Riddle 34* describes one weapon – the rake – used in this battle against nature.

[33] M. Bloch, *Feudal Society*, volume 1: *The Growth of Ties of Dependence*, trans. L. A. Manyon, 2nd ed. (London, 1962), p. 61.

[34] Most are mentioned only in glossaries; see Jordan, *Die altenglischen Säugertiernamen*, pp. 66–8, 75–8, 80–3 and 85–91. One might note also that Anglo-Latin poets describe animals not mentioned in Old English: in his *Enigmata* Aldhelm describes the silkworm, antlion, locust, midge, water strider, hornet, clam, crab, leech, elephant, minotaur and unicorn, and the later poet Eusebius adds the scorpion (*Aenigma LI: De Scorpione*). For further discussion of these texts, particularly Aldhelm's *Enigmata*, see below, pp. 192–5. Although one might explain the exclusion of many of these creatures on the basis of their not being native to Anglo-Saxon England, Old English poets were not averse to describing alien creatures – see, for example, the translation of Lactantius's *The Phoenix*.

Yet spiders,[35] bees,[36] boars,[37] stags,[38] dragons,[39] hawks, swans, whales,[40] birds,[41] wolves,[42] fish and bears[43] do. However unpleasant the climate and conditions, the natural environment was less hostile than the human environment.[44] Yet it is represented as a power more terrifying than human threats.[45] One might suppose that the representation of wild beasts and the wind reflects a misapprehension of the most significant

[35] There appears to be a spider in the charm, *Against a Dwarf*, but it only exists by textual emendation – the manuscript itself reads *spiden wiht*, not *spiderwiht* (9b). It has also been suggested that the spider is actually a dwarf; see Skemp, 'The Old English Charms', p. 294. There does appear to have been a connection between dwarves and spiders; see Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, pp. 471 and 1497 and Jamborn, '*Peri Didaxeon*', pp. 149–53. For further discussion of this charm, see below, pp. 103–4 and 117.

[36] Bees appear briefly in Exeter Book *Riddle 27*, and possibly in Exeter Book *Riddle 57* (other solutions include swallows, starlings, hailstones, raindrops, swifts, jackdaws, musical notes and demons – see Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, p. 623). Bees are also addressed in *The Bee Charm*. For explanation of some elements of the charm on the practical grounds of bee-keeping, see Spamer, 'The Old English Bee Charm'. See also E. P. Hamp, 'Notes on the Old English Bee Charm', *JIES* 9 (1981), 338–40. Bees also figure prominently in Aldhelm's prose *De virginitate* 14–19 and *Enigma XX: Apis*.

[37] The boar appears in *Maxims II* 19b–20a. The boars mentioned in *Beowulf* tend to be images on armour and treasure (303b, 1111–12a, 1286b, 1453a); they are once used in a metaphor for human fierceness (1328a).

[38] The stag appears in *Beowulf* 1368–72a and in Exeter Book *Riddles 88* and *93*.

[39] Dragons appear in *Beowulf* and *Maxims II* 26b–7a.

[40] The hawk, swan and whale all appear in *Beowulf*; for a discussion of their role in the poem, see Metcalf, 'Ten Natural Animals'. The hawk is also mentioned in *The Battle of Maldon* (7–8). The swan appears in Exeter Book *Riddle 7*. The whale is examined in detail in *The Whale*.

[41] References to birds other than swans and hawks (and the eagles and ravens that help to make up the 'Beasts of Battle') occur in *Guthlac* 733b–8 and 916–19a, *The Phoenix* (other than the phoenix itself, at 158b–67 and 335b–41a), *The Wanderer* 47 and 81, *The Seafarer* 19b–22 and 53–5a, *Maxims II* 38b–9a, and Aldhelm's *Enigmata XXII: Acalantida*, *XXVI: Gallus*, *XXXI: Ciconia*, *XXXV: Nycticorax*, *XLII: Strutio*, *XLVII: Hirundo*, *LVII: Aquila*, *LXIII: Corbus*, and *LXIV: Columba* (Goldfinch, Cock, Stork, Night owl, Ostrich, Swallow, Eagle, Raven and Dove).

[42] Excluding appearances as one of the 'Beasts of Battle', the wolf appears in *Maxims II* 18b–19a, *Fortunes of Men* 12b–13a, and *Maxims I* 146–51.

[43] Fish are described in *Maxims II* 27b–8a and 39b–40a, bears in *Maxims II* 29b–30a.

[44] For further discussion of the dangerously unsettled character of Anglo-Saxon society, see below, pp. 84–8.

[45] For further discussion of natural as opposed to human threats, see below, pp. 38–40.

source of danger on the part of a primitive society,[46] and cite as evidence the selective silences regarding rodents and other, apparently innocuous wildlife: the Anglo-Saxons could afford to ignore much of what they experienced daily and instead represented creatures that they experienced relatively infrequently, such as dragons. One might note also the complete lack of concern for local wildlife in the popular *Liber monstrorum*, which does not contain a single animal that the Anglo-Saxons could ever have met in England.[47] That is, while it may be true that the Anglo-Saxons drew upon more than fear and paranoia when representing natural phenomena in their poetry,[48] it is equally true that they drew upon less than their complete experience of the physical environment. The physical reality of 'the natural world' could play a very small role in determining what of it was represented and how it was represented.

Understanding representations of 'the natural world' in Old English poetry thus demands more than knowledge of the physical reality experienced by the Anglo-Saxons. It requires an examination of each act of representation in its context, for, while the selectivity of the list of animals represented in Old English poetry is obvious, the criteria underlying its selection are not. For example, one need not query too closely the omission of small, insignificant creatures like moles; the heroic tone of most Old English poems renders their inclusion inappropriate. On the other hand, the deer, which undoubtedly figured largely in Anglo-Saxon heroic life as quarry for the noble pastime of hunting, as well as a common source of food for feasts,[49] appears only as the source of material

[46] For example, the animals that probably did the most harm to the Anglo-Saxons were not fierce, powerful beasts like wolves and boars but parasite-carrying sheep and mosquitoes (Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, pp. 10–11), neither of which, as far as can be discerned from the surviving texts, inspired any fear. We would not, of course, expect a people without the benefit of microscopes to consider a sheep or mosquito dangerous. Cf. the view that 'a reputation for heroism is not made by killing creatures that are believed to be harmless or beneficent – sheep for instance' (K. Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1965), p. 25).

[47] For further discussion of the *Liber monstrorum*, see below, pp. 31–3.

[48] They also drew upon earlier texts, for example. For further discussion of the Anglo-Saxons' use of inherited sources, see below, pp. 38–40.

[49] The large number of deer bones found in Anglo-Saxon sites indicates that venison was an important part of the Anglo-Saxon diet. See C. J. Arnold, *An Archaeology of the Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (London, 1988), p. 118. For discussion of the importance of feasting in Old English poetry, see Magennis, *Images of Community*, pp. 60–75.

for inkpots (Exeter Book *Riddles 88* and *93*) and as part of an anecdote designed to emphasise traits of a landscape – Grendel's mere (*Beowulf* 1368–72). In fact not many animals, whether literary or native, appear regularly in poetry; being noticeable, useful, or even dangerous, does not guarantee a place in an Old English poem. The main exceptions, the 'Beasts of Battle',[50] are a literary technique particular to Old English poetry, used to introduce a climax in human relations, a battle. This rhetorical technique offers a useful starting point, for I shall argue that the representation of 'the natural world' in Old English poetry generally is a literary technique characteristic of Old English poetry, though not always so easily identified and defined as the 'Beasts of Battle'.

REPRESENTATION AND VALUE STRUCTURES

A representation is an act of assimilation and interpretation: to represent an object is to place it within a structure that assigns value and meaning to it. Representation thus necessarily involves politics – in the sense of principles, aims and policies – even if the agenda is merely to create a recognisable depiction of the natural world. For example, in early modern England writers represent animals so as to emphasise their sharp differentiation from the human race, and thus for such writers 'the natural world' comprises traits inferior to those of human nature.[51] The depiction of such traits does not merely provide facts about creatures; it reveals how the human race views itself, what it prizes and despises, through its assimilation of otherwise neutral data to value-laden patterns. To insult

[50] The 'Beasts of Battle' type-scene has been summarised as follows: 'in the wake of an army, the dark raven, the dewy plumaged eagle and the wolf of the forest, eager for slaughter and carrion/food, give voice to their joy'. See Griffith, 'Convention and Originality', p. 184. For examples, see *Elene* 27b–30a and 110b–13a, *Beowulf* 3024b–7, *Genesis* 1983b–5a, 2087b–9a and 2159b–61, *The Battle of Brunanburh* 60–5a, *Exodus* 162–7, and *Judith* 205b–12a. For further discussion, see A. Renoir, 'Crist Ihesu's Beasts of Battle: A Note on Oral-Formulaic Theme Survival', *Neophil* 60 (1976), 455–9; F. P. Magoun, Jr, 'The Theme of the Beasts of Battle in Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *NM* 56 (1955), 81–90; F. C. Robinson, 'Notes on the Old English *Exodus*', *Anglia* 80 (1962), 363–78 at 365–8; J. R. Hall, '*Exodus* 166b, *cwyldrof*: 162–7, the Beasts of Battle', *Neophil* 74 (1990), 112–21; A. Bonjour, '*Beowulf* and the Beasts of Battle', *PMLA* 72 (1957), 563–73.

[51] Thomas, *Man in the Natural World*, p. 40.

someone, for example, Shakespeare assigns animal characteristics to the offending human party through labels such as 'ingrateful fox' or 'detested kite'.[52] The representation of animals may also serve more traditionally political ends, such as the early modern interpretation of the bee-hive as a model state, with a 'king' served obediently by workers committed to the good of the community[53] – that is, writers can interpret the natural world, and thus represent it, as a justification of the established, hierarchical order. However realistic or objective a representation appears, it inevitably depends upon such choices and judgements.[54]

The reliance of representation upon value structures – whether personal, social, political or religious – renders evaluation on the basis of right or wrong impossible. The modern inclination to reject 'inaccurate' views of the natural world (that is, views that do not award primacy to the evidence of the senses or technological extensions of the senses)[55] involves its own bias, for value structures determine every representation of the natural world,[56] including the present ones proposed and supported by modern science, despite the common belief that 'Science is neither bad nor good but only false or true'.[57] Although it is difficult for those living after the Scientific Revolution[58] to recognise the value judgement in this statement, or to regard science as anything other than the most accurate

[52] See *King Lear*, ed. K. Muir, 8th ed. (London, 1952), III.vii.28 and I.iv.272.

[53] Thomas, *Man in the Natural World*, pp. 62–6.

[54] Cf. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 103.

[55] Clair, *Unnatural History*, p. 14.

[56] Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 15; S. L. Jaki, 'Introduction', in P. Duhem, *To Save the Phenomena: An Essay on the Idea of Physical Theory from Plato to Galileo*, trans. E. Doland and C. Maschler (Chicago, 1969), p. xxv; F. Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, 3rd ed. (London, 1992), p. 317.

[57] C. Sherrington, *Man on his Nature*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1951), p. 260. Cf. also Cassiodorus's opinion in *An Introduction to Divine and Human Readings by Cassiodorus Senator*, trans. L. W. Jones, Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies 40 (New York, 1946), p. 179.

[58] 'Since [the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries] changed the character of men's habitual mental operations even in the conduct of the non-material sciences, while transforming the whole diagram of the physical universe and the very texture of human life itself ... it looms ... as the real origin both of the modern world and of the modern mentality.' H. Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science 1300–1800*, 2nd ed. (London, 1957), pp. vii–viii.

and useful way to approach the natural world,[59] it is not difficult to observe that the Anglo-Saxons applied different principles and pursued different aims. However difficult it is to scrutinise the value structures determining present representations, neglecting the choices and judgements involved in representation can only misrepresent representations of 'the natural world' in Old English poetry.

Some of the value structures contributing to these representations can easily be identified. For example, one can isolate aims which are as straightforwardly didactic as those identified in early modern representations. Often these aims are related to morality and appear misguided and misleading by the standards controlling modern representations of the natural world.[60] The Old English poem *The Panther*, a translation from the Latin *Physiologus*,[61] for example, provides an abundance of descriptive information: the creature is friendly to all but the dragon, beautiful, multicoloured, unique and loveable; it rests three days after eating and then emits a pleasant sound and odour from its mouth which attract man and beast alike (15–54). These traits would be unlikely to allow one to identify a panther (or leopard).[62] It is more important, however, to observe that the poem's representation of the panther maintains aims different from those of a modern field guide than to point out that the writer had never observed a panther. The intention of the description is to illuminate the characteristics and actions of Christ; like the panther created by the poem's representation,

> Swa is dryhten god, dreama rædend,
> eallum eaðmede oþrum gesceaftum,
> duguða gehwylcre, butan dracan anum,
> attres ordfruman. Þæt is se ealda feond,

[59] F. Durham and R. D. Purrington, *Frame of the Universe: A History of Physical Csomology* (New York, 1983), p. viii.

[60] Among the many critics who voice this view are Crombie, *Augustine to Galileo*, p. 35; J. D. North, *Stars, Minds, and Fate: Essays in Ancient and Medieval Cosmology* (London, 1989), p. x; Clair, *Unnatural History*, p. 12; Whewell, *History of the Inductive Sciences*, I, 216; Kimble, *Geography in the Middle Ages*, pp. 1–2; Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, p. 164; Dreyer, *A History of Astronomy*, pp. 207–8.

[61] For discussion of the Old English *The Physiologus* and its sources, see below, p. 186, n. 42 and pp. 190–2.

[62] For the identification of the panther as a leopard, see George and Yapp, *Naming of the Beasts*, p. 53.

þone he gesælde in susla grund,
ond gefetrade fyrnum teagum,
biþeahte þreanydum, ond þy þriddan dæge
of digle aras, þæs þe he deað fore us
þreo niht þolade, þeoden engla,
sigora sellend. Þæt wæs swete stenc,
wlitig ond wynsum geond woruld ealle.
Siþþan to þam swicce soðfæste men
on healfa gehwone heapum þrungon
geond ealne ymbhwyrft eorþan sceata.

(*The Panther* 55–68)[63]

The poem presents traits – however fictional – chosen to promote its point about the nature of Christ rather than to identify the creature itself. Its representation thus blatantly displays the 'interplay' between its 'method of questioning'[64] and the natural world.

MISREPRESENTATION AND MODERN VALUE STRUCTURES

It is in this context that critics' responses to representations of the natural world in Old English poetry should be seen, for too often the understanding of the natural world in the 'Dark Ages' has been unfavourably compared to that in earlier and later ages, as either a vestige of Greek science[65] or a hiatus before the reawakening of later periods.[66] Many

[63] 'So the lord God, the ruler of joys, is gracious to all other creatures, to each man, except for the dragon alone, the source of venom. That is the old enemy, whom he delivered into the abyss of misery, and fettered with fiery cords, [and] covered with afflictions, and on the third day [he] arose from the grave, after he, the prince of angels and giver of victories, endured death for us for three nights. That was a sweet fragrance, beautiful and delightful through all the world. Afterwards men firm in truth thronged to the fragrance in crowds from every side, through the whole extent of the corners of the earth.'

[64] Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, p. 69.

[65] This is almost a commonplace, but see, for example, E. Grant, *Physical Science in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1971), pp. 8 and 12; W. Singer, *From Magic to Science: Essays on the Scientific Twilight* (New York, 1958), p. xx; W. H. Stahl, *Roman Science: Origins, Development, and Influence to the Later Middle Ages* (Westport, CT, 1962), p. 249; Whewell, *History of the Inductive Sciences*, I, 185; M. Cary and E. H. Warmington, *The Ancient Explorers* (London, 1929), p. 190; Wright, *Geographical Lore*, p. 57.

[66] This, too, is a commonplace. See, for example, R. C. Dales, *The Intellectual Life of Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (Washington, DC, 1980), p. 59; Gatch, *Loyalties and*

critics, especially historians of science, perceive no progress in (and questionable maintenance of) thought itself at this time, and propose that only after the inhabitants of Western Europe rediscovered Greek science in the twelfth century did they interact significantly with the natural world. When such critics mention the 'Dark Ages', they allot to it a few pages at most, often blaming the stifling effect of patristic dogma for its lack of curiosity and intellectual vigour,[67] and beginning with a formulaic statement such as, 'In the Dark Ages, there was no progress in _____.'[68] Some critics vault from the discoveries made by the Greeks to their rediscovery in Arabic texts without any indication of the intervening distance, centuries and transformations.[69]

Such accounts imply that *no* representations of the natural world occurred in the 'Dark Ages' – or, at least, nothing except degenerate, sterile and disfigured misconceptions. Of course, the stated intention of many of these accounts – to outline the development of specifically scientific concepts – may explain their dismissive omissions and attendant over-simplifications: if the ideas which are privileged by modern, scientifically oriented societies play little part in the Anglo-Saxons' representations, studying such representations may be seen to offer little of value or interest. Yet later, more 'observant' and 'intellectually gifted' times necessarily develop from an awareness of their past and, if nothing else, construct their own representation of the natural world as a corrective to and contradiction of the 'degeneracy' of the 'Dark Ages'; the early Middle Ages thus contribute, however negatively and indirectly, to the developments of the High Middle Ages. In fact, the contribution must be more significant, for Old English poetry presents not one, derivative representation but multiple, contradictory and often lively representations of 'the natural world'.

Yet these representations have often received little attention for themselves. Critics of the High Middle Ages, for example, characterise

Traditions, pp. 19–20; S. Sambursky, *The Physical World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1962), p. xii; C. D. Hellman, *The Comet of 1577: Its Place in the History of Astronomy*, Columbia University Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law 510 (New York, 1944), p. 65; G. Abetti, *The History of Astronomy*, trans. B. B. Abetti (London, 1954), p. 44.

[67] See, for example, Abrams, 'The Development of Medieval Astronomy', p. 194.

[68] See, for example, Doig, *Concise History of Astronomy*, p. 44.

[69] See, for example, C. H. Cotter, *A History of Nautical Astronomy* (London, 1968).

the developments of their period in opposition to the 'Dark Ages', stressing that the High Middle Ages initiated a new (everywhere the emphasis is on 'new')[70] or 'increased interest in the natural world'.[71] Although this approach to the High Middle Ages has illuminated enough of the 'Dark Ages' to render the comparison meaningful, and although questions such as, 'What has been lost?' and 'What is not yet there?' are valid and productive questions, the information revealed through this approach can only be negative and thus possesses a limited ability to elucidate what *is* there. This limited, negative approach may have affected the portrayal of the High Middle Ages, for one can learn only a limited amount from observing that the High Middle Ages marked new developments from the 'Dark Ages' and that the 'Dark Ages' lacked the developments of the High Middle Ages. Such a circular process of defining one period in opposition to another only defined in terms of the first may have resulted in an imperfect understanding of the High Middle Ages. More important for the present discussion, a tangential or negative approach defines the representations carried out in Old English poetry hardly at all and can misrepresent the complexities involved in its representations of 'the natural world'.

Other critics, especially those writing late in the nineteenth or early in the twentieth century, have sought in Old English poetry the origin of a kind of poetry best exemplified in the Romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Shelley.[72] That is, they seek to find the 'germs' of an English poetic tradition of nature poetry.[73] In Old English poetry they see either an unaffected, fresh and intense feeling for nature,[74] such as was sought by

[70] P. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London, 1982), p. 325; T. Gregory, *Anima mundi: la filosofia di Guglielmo di Conches e la scuola di Chartres*, Pubblicazioni dell'Istituto di Filosofia dell'Università di Roma 3 (Florence, 1955), 176. Cf. also M. Lapidge, 'Ideas of Natural Order in Early Medieval Latin Poetry' (unpubl. PhD dissertation, Univ. of Toronto, 1971), p. 234.

[71] R. Southern, quoted by N. F. Cantor in *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1991), p. 356.

[72] See, for example, Pons, *Le thème et le sentiment de la nature*, p. 116.

[73] E. D. Hanscom, 'The Feeling for Nature in Old English Poetry', *JEGP* 5 (1903–5), 439–63.

[74] See, for example, G. L. Swigget, 'Old English Poetry', *MLN* 8 (1893), 159; F. W. Moorman, *The Interpretation of Nature in English Poetry from Beowulf to Shakespeare*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Sprach- und Kulturgeschichte der germanischen Völker 95 (Strassburg, 1905), p. 33. Cf. also the similar conception of a 'spontaneous overflow

modern poets like Robert Graves, or a limited, underdeveloped sensitivity to nature's beauty.[75] It is clear that these critics analyse Old English poetry on the basis of the poetic conventions of their time; in looking for the origins of poetry contemporary with themselves, they either find what they are looking for or see little of interest.

Judged from the perspective of modern science, classical Greek philosophy, Renaissance cosmology or Romantic poetry, the representation of 'the natural world' in Old English poetry can appear disappointing, limited, erroneous, stagnant, even unimaginative. This judgement, however, derives from inappropriate comparisons. These representations of 'the natural world' are not hampered by unscientific, closed-minded approaches to the natural world, by insufficient technology or by a failure of sensibility; they are not depictions of the natural world at all – not in the senses accepted by later literary critics and those examining the natural world with the scientific method and its tools.[76] Although 'the natural world' in Old English poetry does contain elements that are included in a modern definition of the natural world – winds, seas and animals, for example – it is not a category in contrast with the supernatural. It is not really a self-sufficient, externally defined entity at all. It is instead a reflection of human constructions. With this focus on intangible concepts, it is unsurprising that the representation of 'the natural world' is not inevitably tied to physical reality.

TANGLED TRADITIONS

One of the human constructions served by representations of 'the natural world' in Anglo-Saxon texts was religion; through the allegorical description of *The Panther* the Old English poet, like his or her source, conveyed Christian truths. Representations of 'the natural world' in Old English poetry are not, however, characterised and controlled by a consistent assimilation of data to the cause of morality, just as they are not, as in some modern representations, ruled by the desire for ever more precise

of emotion' in early Celtic nature poetry; see Jackson, *Studies in Early Celtic Nature Poetry*, pp. 81–2 and 104.

[75] See, for example, R. Burton, 'Nature in Old English Poetry', *Atlantic Monthly* 73 (1894), 476–87, at 487.

[76] Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, pp. 4–5.

measurements of cause and effect. Some texts do reveal a concern with determining and limiting meaning (allegorical and otherwise),[77] and it is evident that the Anglo-Saxons did attempt to assimilate 'the natural world' through the process of interpretation as well as through physical means (hunting, domestication, etc.).[78] However, 'the natural world' that they represented in their poetry does not conform to any scheme that they might have inherited from Christian patristic writers or classical models. Nor can one attribute deviations from these authorities to the vestiges of pagan Germanic mythology that survived the Anglo-Saxons' conversion to Christianity. The physical conditions endured by the Anglo-Saxons, classical philosophy and science, Christian dogma and Germanic tradition can all be seen to have contributed to the representation of 'the natural world' in Old English poetry, but no dominant tradition or amalgamation of traditions emerges from this mixture. This is perhaps unsurprising, since Anglo-Saxon literature spans or, at least, draws upon a period of five centuries; one could not expect there to be a single view throughout the whole corpus. One could, however, expect there to be a gradual incorporation of Christian ideology into originally pagan forms of expression (oral-formulaic, heroic poetry, for example), followed by an infusion of the classical theories that accompanied the arrival of literacy and scholarship. Unfortunately, no trace of any progression can be found. The Anglo-Saxons appear not to have been concerned to develop a consistent cosmological scheme or approach to the 'natural world', and they used isolated elements from all of their sources without any apparent awareness of inconsistency.

Examining the representation of 'the natural world' in Old English poetry, therefore, cannot reveal what apparently did not exist: a single, particularly Anglo-Saxon cosmological scheme or world view, an Anglo-Saxon 'natural world'. Although this lack is interesting in itself and raises the question of why the Anglo-Saxons did not attempt to reconcile and integrate the elements and traditions available to them, the question is probably unanswerable; a combination of many factors – such as a paucity of texts relevant to ideas of cosmology, limited understanding of the texts that were available, an unsettled political climate, the continuing vitality

[77] See below, pp. 190–6.

[78] B. Guillemain, 'Avant-Propos', in *Le monde animal et ses représentations au moyen-âge (XI^e–XV^e siècles)* (Toulouse, 1985), pp. 7–8, at 7.

of contradictory, co-existing traditions, and even racial personality[79] – may be considered but cannot ultimately be proven critical. What remains instead is to examine the structures in which the representation of 'the natural world'[80] *did* participate, since it did not participate in a single theory of the universe. What emerges is that the representation of the 'natural world' is never an end in itself and is always ancillary to other issues. It acts as a literary device, used to define what were apparently more important issues: the state of humanity and its position in the universe, the establishment and maintenance of society, the power of extraordinary individuals, the proximity of the deity to creation and the ability of writing to control and limit information.

[79] Cf. Pons, *Le thème et le sentiment de la nature*, p. 149.

[80] Although it is important to remember the differences between modern and Anglo-Saxon conceptions, 'the natural world' will not appear in quotation marks throughout the rest of this book.